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ASIA-PACIFIC CONFERENCE ON EAST TIMOR
An Appeal for Solidarity with East Timor

By Bishop *Aloisius Nobuo Soma*

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It is a great honour to participate in this gathering called by NGOs in the Asia-Pacific region to address one of the most pressing issues of our day. I particularly wish to thank the Filipino sisters and brothers who have given us a very inspiring example of what it means to show solidarity in actions.

First of all I would like to recall the fact that one of the most important tasks of the United Nations since World War II has been furthering self-determination of peoples and the independence of former colonies. The Indonesian military's occupation of East Timor has made a mockery of this important mission and has deprived East Timor of independence and liberation from Portugal which it was to have obtained.

It is not surprising that in support of the liberation, self-determination and independence of East Timor, the United Nations General Assembly passed no fewer than eight resolutions since 1975 condemning the Indonesian occupation and calling for the withdrawal of Indonesian troops from the territory. The Indonesian Government, however, ignored all of these.

I would like to take this opportunity to appeal, with urgency, to the parties involved in this tragic conflict:

First and foremost I appeal to Indonesia. The Republic of Indonesia was founded on lofty principles, principles which I always hold in the highest esteem. The Indonesian military's reckless act of invading East Timor has done nothing but besmirch the honor of the good people, the peace-loving people, of Indonesia. It is my heartfelt wish that Indonesia, returning to the high ideals upon which it was founded, and sincerely embracing the universal principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, will respect the rights of the people of East Timor, withdraw its troops from the territory, and turn its efforts to establishing ties of friendship with its neighbor to the East.

The people of East Timor have had to walk down a long, terrible road of suffering. In spite of this they have indicated that bitterness will not get in the way of friendly relations with their Indonesian neighbors once independence has been achieved and that an independent East Timor will not pose a threat to Indonesia. I sincerely hope that Indonesia will listen with courage and respect to this magnanimous voice of the people of East Timor and will search for the concrete means to bring about a solution to the present conflict.

Next I would like to appeal to the United Nations. I sincerely hope that the United Nations will squarely face the injustice of the present situation, that it will listen to the perfectly reasonable hopes of the people of East Timor, and that it will do all in its power to secure freedom and independence for them. In August 1989 I spoke before a session of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation in support of a proposal that was made in a letter to the UN Secretary General from Bishop Belo of East Timor. The bishop said in his letter that the people of East Timor "have not been consulted. Others speak in the name of the people. Indonesia says that the people of East Timor themselves have never said this... I ask you, as Secretary General, to start in Timor the most normal and democratic process of decolonisation, i.e., the holding of a referendum."

When I went to the United Nations I took petition to the Secretary General supporting Bishop Belo's proposal signed by 1257 church leaders from the Asia-Pacific region, including five cardinals, 32 archbishops, and 80 bishops. Since then support has grown even greater among church people for the struggle to realize an act of self-determination by the East Timorese. I further pledge myself to do all in my power so that the United Nations will seriously listen to what we are saying, secure freedom for East Timor without further delay, and hold a fair referendum.

However, we also realize that the settlement of international issues is not easily achieved at the level of the United Nations or at the level of the governments of countries involved. This is because in most cases most countries in the world, as well as the United Nations, have as their primary concern selfish goals that they refer to as their "national interest,"; goals which have little to do with justice, peace, or love for one's fellow human beings. Non-government organizations, groups of ordinary citizens, exist, do they not, for the purpose of making up for these shortcomings of official bodies. I have come to feel this way particularly in the light of recent happenings. I believe that it is up to us to make a powerful appeal to public opinion around the world on behalf of our sisters and brothers in East Timor who are prevented even from speaking. I have deeply engraved in my heart the words of Bishop Martinho da Costa, now deceased, when he visited Japan: "Don't forget East Timor."

I visited East Timor last year and was very warmly welcomed by Bishop Belo and many other East Timorese. I believed that what moved me more than anything else was to know that many East Timorese people, in the midst of so much suffering and hardship, are striving with great courage, without betraying their ideals, for justice, and justice alone. I would end my speech with a pledge of solidarity to these sisters and brothers in East Timor itself and to each and every East Timorese in exile devoting himself or herself to the struggle of the East Timorese people. May God give you the strength and wisdom needed for this hard but very precious struggle. May you walk in courage, without wavering and with one accord, toward the achievement of your goal, a goal which we too share with all our heart.